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DOES DIFFERENCE HAVE A TYPE?

PHILOFICTION DELEUZE, DIFFERENCE, DIGITAL, MULTIPLICITY, NON-LARUELLE

I just spoke yesterday yesterday at the University of Pennsylvania on the topics of “control societies” and “ontologies of difference,” two themes that have interested me a great deal over the years. In fact I have been so struck by Deleuze’s essay “Postscript on Societies of Control,” a short and rather unusual text from the very end of his life, that I’ve spoken at length about it before and even devoted an entire chapter to it in my book on Laruelle, chapter five titled “Computers.” I have many thoughts about this short essay and about the topic it has introduced, control society, but what fascinates me even more today is the other phrase, that old poststructuralist theme, the *ontologies of difference*. The theory of difference has played an important role in many endeavors, from semiotics and structural analyses, to feminist and queer theory, to postcoloniality and critical race theory. What strikes me as most interesting today is the fact that difference — along with a related concept, multiplicity — is in fact not one thing. Rather we might speak of *kinds* of difference, or kinds of multiplicity. To be sure, pluralism has frequently characterized discussions around difference. Yet I’m drawn in a slightly different direction, not that difference is plural but that difference is (merely) different.

My thought process began, as many times it does, by picking up a thread from a few years ago. Here is an excerpt from footnote 244n12 in *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, with internal quotations from François Laruelle’s *Le principe de minorité* (Paris: Aubier, 1981):

Laruelle mentions three different kinds of multiplicities, (1) “discrete or arithmetic” multiplicities, (2) continuous multiplicities, which he associates with Difference, and (3) what he calls dispersive multiplicities, which he also labels “Unary Multiplicities or Minorities” claiming that they are “the absolute concept or the essence of multiplicities” (p. 6).

Laruelle’s analysis of multiplicity — an analysis and not an expression or a synthesis — is sophisticated but also enigmatic. We are all masters in some sense of the first kind of multiplicity, for this is multiplicity as mastery, multiplicity as abstraction, multiplicity as pure rationality. And we are all intimate in some sense with the second kind of multiplicity, for this is multiplicity as intimacy, multiplicity as an affective sensation or quality, the Eros of multiplicity. But how are we to understand Laruelle’s third mode? What does he mean by “unary” multiplicities? What does he mean by minority?

In his analysis of Bergson and duration, Gilles Deleuze identified “two types of multiplicities,” one a difference in degree and the other a difference in kind:

“One is represented by space...: It is a multiplicity of exteriority, of simultaneity, of juxtaposition, of order, of quantitative differentiation, of *difference in degree*; it is a numerical multiplicity, *discontinuous and actual*. The other type of multiplicity appears in pure duration: It is an internal multiplicity of succession, of fusion, of organization, of heterogeneity, of qualitative discrimination, or of *difference in kind*; it is a *virtual and continuous* multiplicity that cannot be reduced to numbers.” (38)

Qualitative discrimination versus quantitative differentiation: Deleuze did not frequently use terms like “analog” and “digital,” nevertheless these two elemental modes of mediation seem to be guiding his inquiry. The digital is the realm of difference in quantity and degree. The digital is discontinuous. It exteriorizes and hence is the literal and actual fabricator of space — even for all those things that are not space (temporality, thinking), it spatializes them all the same. Likewise the analog, in Deleuze’s quaint phrase, “cannot be reduced to numbers,” for it is purely and strictly heterogenous, consisting of pure qualities, sensations, or affects without common measure.

Deleuze agrees with Laruelle, in other words, and these two multiplicities map onto the first two provided by Laruelle. Deleuze’s “difference in degree” is equivalent to Laruelle’s “discrete or arithmetic” multiplicity. And Deleuze’s “difference in kind” is equivalent to Laruelle’s “continuous” multiplicity.

For his part, Alain Badiou also endorses this elemental typing of difference. He is even willing to inflate the difference and superimpose it onto the history of philosophy, suggesting in essence that the elemental typing of difference is, at the same time, the elemental typing of philosophy overall. It's a passage I particularly like, and I've quoted it in the past:

"Since its very origins...philosophy has interrogated the abyss which separates numerical discretization from the geometrical continuum. [...] from Plato to Husserl, passing by the magnificent developments of Hegel's *Logic*, the strictly inexhaustible theme of the dialectic of the *discontinuous* and the *continuous* occurs time and time again." (*Being and Event*, 281, translation modified, emph. added)

Or to translate into contemporary parlance: the strictly inexhaustible theme of *digital* and *analog* occurs time and time again.

Of course there are many other ontologies of difference that I won't discuss here: from Plato and Hegel, as Badiou suggests, to the famous elaborations of difference in Derrida or Irigaray, to contemporary figures like Malabou who have morphed difference into a new shape. This is not to mention the larger field of feminist philosophy, within which Irigaray and Malabou play a part, as well as other fields like critical race theory which has since its very inception grappled with the question of multiplicity. I'm most familiar with the French and continental traditions, but these do not exhaust this "inexhaustible theme" and there are many other references one might add.

Still within this small pool of thinkers we have something of a consensus. The consensus is that: difference and multiplicity abound; difference and multiplicity are not one kind of thing; rather, there are different types of multiplicity, different races of multiplicity.

I tend to agree with Badiou's suggestion that a typing of philosophy comes by way of a typing of multiplicity. And this approach to difference, this *rendering* of difference, is one way of understanding the so-called Standard Model of philosophy. The Standard Model is a model in which difference and multiplicity abound. And yet the *genes* of difference — the genus or race of difference — proliferate along two types. (Difference is, in this way, difference-oriented. Difference has a race, just as racialization leverages difference.)

Let us return now to Laruelle's *Le principe de minorité*. As I've suggested, the first two types of multiplicities have more popular labels today, digital and analog. The digital is the domain of discrete arithmetic, while the analog is the domain of the continuous. What to make, then, of Laruelle's third category, the category of minority or what he calls "the absolute concept or the essence of multiplicities"?

Minority is the un-typing of the type. (The un-typing of racialization is something else, but certainly related.) To be clear, this "third term" is in fact not third in a sequential or organizational sense. The third term is really nothing more than a condition to which the Standard Model is submitted. What results is not so much the "minor literature" described by Deleuze and Guattari but the "identity of minority" described by Laruelle. A kind of "structuralism from below," this minority is synonymous with generic humanity, or what Laruelle will call in a newly forthcoming translation ordinary man.

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